

John L. Wisdom House
535 East Main Street
Jackson
Madison County
Tennessee

HABS No. TN-177

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57-34250,
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PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

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FOLLOWS

Historic American Buildings Survey
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
Washington, D.C.

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

JOHN L. WISDOM HOUSE

HABS No. TN-177

Location: 535 East Main Street, Jackson, Madison County, Tennessee.

Latitude: 35° 36' 51"

Longitude: 88° 47' 42"

Present Owner
and Occupant: Mrs. Herbert Oglesby.

Present Use: Private residence.

Significance: Designed by a prominent New Jersey architect, this Queen Anne style residence was built by John L. Wisdom, a Jackson businessman, in 1880-81. The house is noteworthy for its active exterior massing and for the beautiful interior which features an abundance of walnut trimmings and colored glass window compositions.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: 1880-81.
2. Architect: Unknown; said to have been from New Jersey. John L. Wisdom served as his own contractor. Construction foreman was Mike Branner; brickwork was supervised by Harvey McCabe.
3. Original and subsequent owners: The house has been in the possession of only one family and only two generations of that family since it was built. The chain of title has not been completely recorded in Madison County, but the facts were confirmed by a daughter and a daughter-in-law of the original owner.

1880 Deed March 25, 1880, recorded March 27, 1880 in Book 37 page 491 (Lot, 75' x 250', \$1200.00)
A.T. Pegues and Mary A. Pegues (wife)
to
John L. Wisdom

1954 Will November 7, 1953, recorded March 11, 1954 in Will Book F page 602
Ray Meriwether Wisdom (son of John L. Wisdom)
to
Mae C. Wisdom (his wife; now Mrs. H. E. Oglesby)

- B. Historical Context: The Wisdom House was the personal triumph of John L. Wisdom, a progressive and civic minded citizen of Jackson for fifty years. Born in Purdy, Tennessee in 1850, Wisdom moved to Jackson in 1874. He was first a partner in the Duke and Wisdom grocery business. In later life he was a founder or director of the Citizens' Gas Light Company, the Suburban Street Railway Company, the Budde-Weis Furniture Manufacturing Company, the Citizens' Compress Company, the Hollywood Cemetery Company, the First National Bank, and the Second National Bank. Wisdom was married in 1879, and began his new home shortly thereafter. The Jackson Tribune and Sun for April 15, 1880 notes that "Mr. John L. Wisdom will commence the erection soon of a fine brick mansion on Main Street, Pegues' lot next to the M&O Railroad." By the following January it was nearing completion; the same paper reported on January 20, 1881 that a thief had been apprehended "in the new brick house of Mr. John L. Wisdom, on Main Street Monday night, stealing lumber." Wisdom died intestate on March 21, 1926. His widow remained in the home, dying intestate on October 19, 1949. The children divided the property by consent, Ray L. Wisdom purchasing the home from his brother and two sisters. His will is recorded.

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: See Significance statement on page 1.
2. Condition of fabric: Excellent; the building is in good structural condition and is well maintained.

B. Description of Exterior:

1. Overall dimensions: The house measures 47 feet from north to south and 32 feet from east to west, exclusive of the ten-foot deep veranda on the south and west sides. It is two stories tall to the eaves and has a full third story under the steep roof. Essentially the building is rectangular in shape with a rectangular bay projection off the southwest corner and a three-sided projection on the west face.
2. Foundations: Brick.
3. Walls: The 14' thick brick walls have a Flemish bond exterior surface. The brick is painted red, but was always of red color. An interesting detail is the inclusion of brick rowlock courses just above the second floor stone window sills. At the attic level some gable walls are of frame construction. The left hand gable on the south front has a pressed tin facing. The other gable on the south front has a half-timber motif. The gable on the north rear has asphalt shingles.

4. Structural system, framing: Brick bearing walls support the wood joists and roof rafters.
5. Porches: A ten-foot deep veranda extends across the entire south front and along the west side about half way. In the center of the front porch is an interesting gable roof with pendants and Gothic style gable face. The porch has a wood deck with turned wood columns which rest upon brick piers. The columns have cut angle brackets which help to carry the wood joists for the porch roof. The structural members are painted black; the deck is painted grey.

Another porch, located at the northeast corner of the house, has been altered and enclosed as a garden room.

There is a small porch at the center of the second floor on the south side. Its deck is built into the first floor porch roof.

On the third floor there are two balconies on the south side in the right hand gable and on the west side. They have decorative turned columns and railings, and the balcony on the front (south) elevation has pendants.

6. Chimneys: There are four chimneys on the house. Two are located at the east exterior wall; one is near the west end on the south exterior wall; the fourth is on the bay projection on the west side. All of them are of brick with brick corbelling and recessed brick panels. The elaborate brick forms stand approximately 10' and more above the tops of the roof forms.

7. Openings:

- a. Doorways and doors: The main entrance doorway is located at the center of the south facade. It has a double door behind louvered panels. The doors measure 2'-6" x 7'-9" x 2" and have three panels each. They are flanked with leaded colored glass, double-hung windows (2/2) and are topped by a leaded colored glass transom.

The rear entrance is a new sliding glass door. It gives access to the new garden room. The former door is 2'-6" x 8'-5" x 2" and has glass lights over a wood panel with an X board application.

- b. Windows: Wood double-hung windows are used throughout the house. They measure 3'-2" x 8'-3" and have sixteen small lights over one large light. There is some variation in width. All windows have stone sills. The first floor windows have segmental arched heads; those on the second floor are flat, with brick heads.

A window opening onto the west side of the veranda has a wood panel below. The panel divides and opens out after the lower sash is lifted, providing a passage from interior to exterior. A similar window opens into the rear garden room. These openings measure 3'-2" x 10'-4" overall.

There are a few other types of windows such as the 1'-9" x 5'-7" fixed sash, colored glass chimney window set in the chimney on the west side (first floor library). At the second floor rear is a colored glass window composition. It has two double-hung windows topped by a three light transom.

8. Roofs:

- a. Shape, covering: The main gable roofs, gables and other roofs all are covered with green asphalt shingles. A pair of gables extend parallel from the front to rear. Sections of the main roofs extend out to form shed roofs and to cover the southwest bay window and the additions.

The rafters of the roof extend beyond the walls and are exposed. The soffit is of wood boards.

C. Description of Interior:

1. Floor plans: The house has no basement.

The house is essentially of the center hall variety despite the visual complexity implied by the exterior form. The hall extends from the south front to the enclosed rear porch. To the west of the hall is a parlor with a library, which is in the bay window. To the east of the hall is a dining room with a den in the northeast corner of the house. This room was formerly the kitchen. Between the dining room and den is a very small and compact kitchen. Along the north end is a pantry, elevator (where the rear stairs were once located), a bathroom and the garden room.

The second floor plan is similar in layout and has four chambers above the major rooms. The chamber in the northeast corner has been converted to a furnace room. At the south end of the central hall is an alcove study.

The third floor is built into the attic. It is one large room across the north side and two chambers, with a storage room between, along the south front.

2. Stairways: The main stairway is situated along the east wall of the central hall. Its first floor newel is a heavy, massive piece of carved walnut, and is topped with an interesting brass lamp. Each tread has two turned walnut balusters. The stringers have cut wood detailing.

Ascent is made toward the north. There are fifteen risers (7" risers, 11-1/4" x 3'-6" treads) to a landing with four risers to the left and another landing, followed by four risers to the second floor. There is a newel in each landing.

A second stairway was at the north end of the house and is now an elevator.

The attic stairway is located directly over the main stairway and is completely enclosed at the second floor level. There are twenty risers (7" risers; 11-1/2" x 3'-5" treads), with winders to the left.

3. Flooring: The hall and dining room have 1-1/2" light and dark oak boards with parquet and other inlaid patterns. The second floor has 3-1/2" to 4-1/2" pine boards. The floors on the third floor have dark green asphalt tiles. The kitchen and bathrooms have asphalt and ceramic tiles.
4. Wall and ceiling finish: Wood lath and plaster is used. The walls are finished with wallpaper. The ceilings are plaster with interesting features (see also Decorative features and trim). The family room and kitchen have wood paneling. The garden room has exposed brick. The attic walls and ceilings are of wood except in the chambers where a plaster finish is found.
5. Openings:
 - a. Doorways and doors: Major interior doors vary in size from 2'-8" to 3'-5" on width and 6'-10" to 7'-11" in height. They are of walnut and have four or six panels; some four panel doors have transoms.

There is a pair of sliding walnut doors on the east and north walls of the parlor. The nine panel doors measure 4'-0" x 9'-0" x 2-1/2" each. The doors have flat walnut wood surrounds 6-3/8" wide which are scored with three grooves.
 - b. Windows: All windows have operable louvered shutters of walnut.
6. Decorative features and trim: Most of the interior is trimmed with walnut, and includes the doors and their surrounds, window

surrounds, curtain rods and their holders (original to the house), shutters and stair trimmings. Also, there are 11" walnut baseboards.

The center hall on the first floor has a 4" molded plaster dado. The plaster ceilings have plaster coves, panel motifs and medallions.

Each major room has a fireplace although that in the dining room has been closed up. The mantelpieces are of walnut. The most elaborate mantelpiece is located on the west wall of the library. It stands 10' high in total composition and includes the colored glass chimney window mentioned earlier. This glass features a woman playing a harp. The words, "warm ye in friendship," are carved in the mantelpiece.

In the dining room there are a walnut buffet and a walnut plate rail.

7. Hardware: Standard hardware types are employed in the house, but they are elaborately finished with stamped and cast patterns.
8. Mechanical equipment:
 - a. Heating, air conditioning: A furnace room has been built into the northeast corner bedroom on the second floor. The rear garden room has an air conditioning unit.
 - b. Lighting: The original gas fixtures have been converted to electric power.
 - c. Plumbing: Plumbing has always been in the house, but modern fixtures are presently found. When built, the house contained one of the earliest local running water bathtubs. Water was supplied from a walnut encased tank in the attic. The tank was filled by a pump in the back yard.

D. Site:

1. General setting and orientation: The Wisdom House is situated on the north side of Main Street on a lot immediately to the east of the railroad tracks. There is a lawn about 30' deep at the front and the lot extends back to Poplar Street. The house faces south.

The house is tightly restricted. On the east there is a line of planting which obscured views from the west. On the east there is a driveway separating the house from its neighbor house. To the north there is a large tree which blocks out a view.

2. Outbuilding: There is a later garage/storage building to the northeast of the house.

PART III. SOURCES OF INFORMATION

A. Interview:

Interview with Mrs. William Holland, Sr. (nee Loraine Wisdom) conducted August 15, 1972. Mrs. Holland had an undated clipping from an unknown newspaper which enumerated the accomplishments of her father, John L. Wisdom.

B. Bibliography:

1. Primary and unpublished sources:

Property Records, incomplete. Their place of repository may possibly be the Madison County Courthouse.

2. Secondary and published sources:

"Specifications Too Complicated For Contractor, So Late John L. Wisdom Took The Job Himself," Jackson Sun, Sesquicentennial Edition (1972), p. 15 (Life and Leisure Section).

Jackson Tribune and Sun, April 15, 1880 Newspaper article about the construction of the house.

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HABS - West Tennessee Project
August 15, 17, 1972

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Project Historian
HABS - West Tennessee Project
Summer 1972

PART IV. PROJECT INFORMATION

This 1972 project was undertaken by the Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS) in cooperation with the Tennessee Historical Commission and the West Tennessee Historical Society. Under the direction of John Poppeliers, Chief of HABS, the project was completed by Robert C. Giebner (University of Arizona), project supervisor, and Richard H. Hulan, project historian (Nashville), with architects James D. Skelton (University of Illinois) and Mark D. Frederickson (University of Arizona) and student architects Darrell K. Pattison (University of Cincinnati) and John P. Vergos (University of Tennessee) at the Memphis, Tennessee field office on the campus of Memphis State University.

The photographs of the house were taken in the 1970s by Jack E. Boucher, HABS staff photographer.

The written data was edited in the Spring of 1985 by Susan McCown, a HABS staff historian in the Washington, D.C. office, for transmittal to the Library of Congress.

ADDENDUM TO
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HABS No. TN-177

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